

Carnival Sideshow

by Arthur Jaz

published in The Write Gallery in September 2001 under the name of J. Michael Cook

I

The monkey boy has something to say. Walter hands him a banana and listens intently. Sebastian knows just a few English words: friend, cookie, popcorn, and a handful of others. The elephants still need to be fed and a few tents are waiting to be erected, but Walter decides he has a few minutes to kill.

Sebastian smiles underneath all that mangy fur and says, "Water. Friend. Water friend."

The monkey boy has been saying that for the past week or so now, since before the carnival left Rockford. Walter laughs to himself, finally realizing the truth. Sebastian is trying to say, Walter. Friend. They smile at each other.

II

Kurt and Kraig are the twins. Their faces are identical and they share three arms and two legs. Kurt is the entertainer, regaling the carnies with impressions of Al Jolson and Groucho Marx. Kraig is the intellectual, barely speaking, nose perpetually buried in some obscure book. On stage, Kurt sings "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum" while Kraig reads a newspaper and pretends not to be an exhibit.

III

The carnival will be open soon. Fathers and mothers chase their unruly, screaming children outside the gates. The scent of fresh, salty peanuts stains the air.

IV

Nigel wants to take the tickets, but the man in the long red coat never lets him.

"Why?" asks the diminutive Englishman, posh and proud. "Is it because I'm different, Squire? A cat is a lot more different, my dear Sir, but the good people love a cat!"

Nigel is fond of saying this. The man in the long red coat is firm, unyielding. Nigel raises all thirty-nine inches of himself off the ground, propping himself up onto a bench, and fixes the boss with a malignant stare. Yet there is nothing else he can do but rehearse his act for the sideshow. And this he will do with dignity; he is, after all, a professional performer.

V

The girls practice their own act in a deserted field far away from the carnival site. They have no delusions about their status in the eyes of the man in the long red coat. To him, their sole purpose in life is to be a decoration, a window dressing to attract the public. One tall (Helen, standing at seven-feet, five), one small (Dot, standing at two-feet, ten), both as mysterious as they are beautiful. Helens voice threatens to give out at one point as she struggles to hit the high notes, but Dot winks to coax her along. They've gone over this song for three hours straight. Dot in particular is very proud. She wrote it herself three weeks ago, just prior to joining the carnival and teaming up with Helen. They make it to the end of the song. Dot mentions that maybe they should skip the show and take it on the road themselves. Helen giggles.

VI

Nigel paces. He is outraged to have been spoken to in this manner. The man in the long red coat will not get away with this.

Sebastian, the monkey boy, pokes his head into Nigel's tent and says, "Friend. Itty cookie friend."

Nigel grins wearily, handing Sebastian a ginger snap.

"Friend," Sebastian repeats.

The show will start in ten minutes.

VII

They call her Zim. She cannot remember when she joined the carnival, or where she came from. All she knows is that there was a quaint, funny little boy long ago, and that he used to imitate her high-pitched voice. He ran around laughing. She fell to the ground, crying softly. Overhead, the apples on the tree danced, superimposed on cloudless sky. She could not perceive color. The laughing boy did not know that. There was also a large, terminally sad woman who used to feed her strawberries. That is all she can remember today. She ended up at the carnival. The ringmaster reminds her of the dancing apples. The other people are nice. They call her Zim.

VIII

KAVANAGHS TRAVELING SIDESHOW!

ONE WEEK ONLY!

HERE IN YOUR VERY OWN TOWN!

FEAST YOUR EYES ON THE MISSING LINK, THE SIAMESE TWINS, THE HUMAN SKELETON, AND MANY, MANY MORE!

LISTEN TO THE HARMONY OF A GIANTESS AND A DWARF!

PREPARE TO HAVE YOUR SENSES EXPANDED BY THESE FREAKS OF NATURE!

FAINT OF HEART BE FOREWARNED!

IX

Everyone is in place except the monkey boy. The pressure is on. Sebastian is the opening act. The man in the long red coat will not wait long. Nigel has been with the sideshow longer than most, and he has seen the ringmaster punish other sideshow performers by leaving them behind when the carnival moves on. The monkey boy will never survive on his own. Nigel has to find him.

"Bloody hell," he mutters.

X

Sebastian hides in a ditch about a block from the carnival. He imagines that nobody can see him. He is invisible. He thinks of Walter, his friend. Sometimes he likes to think of Walter as his father, back to pick him up the way he dropped him off. He closes his eyes. Pictures his mother the day he was born. He knows she screamed, but he imagines she smiled. He imagines. In his mind's eye the world is a place of tranquility, of thousands of people living in the mountains who look just like him. He is always imagining something. A few minutes tick by. The itty cookie friend walks by his hiding place, searching for something. Sebastian runs to him. Follows him. The itty cookie friend is irascible, but his eyes are kind. Sebastian has to pee.

XI

"Faint of heart be forewarned." Kavanagh's favorite phrase, and he uses it often.

The customers are hungry, eager to be frightened. Kavanagh feeds on their eagerness. The world is filled with spectators. Nobody wants to stick an arm down the lion's throat, but a lot of people will sit back and watch from a safe distance.

Kavanagh merely gives them what they want.

He stands before the crowd, crimson jacket draped over shoulders, an elegant smile playing over his lips. "Ladies and gentlemen, my humble congratulations," he says in a deep, authoritative voice. "You should be placed a cut above the common folk, who simply walk past this tent without stopping. They are afraid to see the monsters; you are not. They refuse to spy on the deformed, the incomplete, the missing links of our society. But you, my friends, have not refused."

Coughs, clearing throats. Discomfort.

Full attention.

"I found Sebastian during a hunting expedition to the dark jungles of Africa," Kavanagh continues. "When I discovered the poor boy he was three years old, scavenging for scraps of food in a hostile environment. I followed him to his village, where I met his dying mother, Matilda. Matilda told me about her rare incurable virus, and about the violent rape that resulted in the birth of young Sebastian. She had been molested by a crazed gorilla; yet the decidedly interracial coupling had produced the sweetest child that woman had ever seen. She asked me to bring him with me when I returned to the States, and this I have done."

Every word captivating, and not a single one based in fact. But Kavanagh knows that people don't really want to hear the truth. What they want to hear are lies made to sound true.

Kavanagh is an accomplished liar.

"Faint of heart be forewarned, for you are about to behold the most amiable half-breed human gorilla the world has ever seen. Meet Sebastian."

He gestures offstage for the monkey boy to join him.

XII

Sebastian follows Nigel back to the tent, but only because Nigel promised to tell the boy a story after the show. Nigel tells lots of good stories. In one of his stories all the freaks seize control of the carnival and make the man in the long red coat stand onstage to be gawked at by hundreds of people. He plans to write his stories down someday and sell them. Ink pens are big and awkward in his little hands; he gets frustrated easily. It could be a lot worse, he tells himself. He could have no hands at all.

XIII

All of the monkey boy's friends are here. Itty cookie friend smiles at him, pushes him gently toward the stage. Kurt snatches the newspaper from his brother Kraig's hands so he won't be distracted while Sebastian performs. Helen lifts Dot up so she can see around Waldo, the fat man. Zim watches Sebastian with huge, bulging blue eyes while she practices her palm-reading act on Walter. Everyone is here to support Sebastian, and they'll be able to see him dance as soon as he finds a place to pee.

The man in the long red coat chuckles onstage, but his eyes are not cheerful. He turns and stares at Sebastian, glares at him. "Get your flea-infested ass out here," he stage-whispers.

The monkey boy steps out to see the crowd. Someone in the back, a man with a walrus moustache, says, "Dear Lord, do you see that thing? It's hideous!" Another voice retorts, "Yeah, but I bet it'd go for a mint and a half at one of them science laboratories."

The red coat man shakes his head, squinting into the audience. "I'm sorry, but I must put an end to such notions here and now. None of the exhibits are for sale. It would destroy them to be exploited in that sort of manner."

"They don't know if they're being exploited or not, they're mindless monsters!" Walrus Moustache says.

Sebastian's legs bounce up and down. Walter says from backstage, "Never mind them, Sebastian. Just do the dance."

Water friend. Water friend likes to feed him bananas and tell him he's a good person. But the good people love a cat. A cat. A lot more different. But the good people. The monkey boy stares at a tiny ketchup stain on the sleeve of an elderly woman in the front row. He can't move. He can't remember what it is he's supposed to do exactly. The world blends in and out of existence as his legs continue to bounce. They're all waiting for him, the crowd, his friends, the man in the long red coat. Maybe he should say something.

"Us not cats," he says, and the locks on his bladder break and his crotch and pant legs and the floor beneath him are covered in urine. His pants are wet and sticky and hot, so he takes them off. The front-row elderly woman faints, cracking her head on the concrete floor. Another woman screams. People begin to complain about the rising smell of piss in the carnival tent. The man in the long red coat rushes him, swears, grabs him by both arms, and the act is over.

XIV

They call her Zim. She remembers very little about the show today, but she does know her palm-reading was a hit. The people were happy because the old woman got up from the floor on her own and didn't cry and didn't die. The people's palms said happy things, and so Zim said happy things too. She bowed to the people when she was done. The ringmaster told the people she was a pinhead. He smells like apples after they've been on a shelf in the garage for about a year. The other people call her Zim. They say her eyes are a beautiful, deep blue. She doesn't know what blue is. She told one man he would make a lot of money. He laughed out loud and then winked at her. That's all she can remember right now.